

# GIANTS ON REEL

Interview by *Tay Huizhen*  
 Images Courtesy of *John Madere, Kathy Brew, Roberto Guerra, Jeff Dupre, James Belzer and Anonymous*

There are only two film festivals in the world dedicated solely to the creative realms of art, design and architecture. A Design Film Festival (ADFF) is one of them, and the first of its kind in Asia. Since its 2010 inception in Singapore, the festival has travelled to Berlin, Taipei, Kaohsiung, Bangkok and Portland. Films screened include features on renowned designers and creative visionaries like Rem Koolhaas, Yohji Yamamoto and Jun Takahashi.

Back with a 2013 edition, ADFF will feature a diverse programme of 12 official film selections, 10 of which are making their Asian premiere in Singapore. The line-up includes award-winning films that range from the sensational New York Fashion Week documentary *The Tents* to a major retrospective of performance artist Marina Abramović. The directors and producers of three films to be screened at ADFF 2013 tell us more about their subjects and what inspired them to make these films.

## DESIGN IS ONE: LELLA & MASSIMO VIGNELLI

—*The creative pair, Kathy Brew and Roberto Guerra, on spotlighting the work of another, and the Vignellis' legacy in design.*



*What was your first exposure to the Vignellis' designs?*  
 KATHY (K): As Barry Bergdoll, Chief Curator of Architecture & Design at the Museum of Modern Art in NYC, states in the film, "The Vignellis are known by everybody, even by people who don't know their name. They're surrounded by the things that they've conceived." And so, for many, the first exposure to their designs are through ubiquitous encounters with their work in the public realm—the logos for American Airlines, Bloomingdales, Saks Fifth Avenue, Benetton; the Knoll furniture; the iconic NYC subway map from the 70s; the stackable plastic dinnerware, and so much more. One may not know exactly their first exposure to the Vignellis' designs because there are so many.

*The Vignellis are an institution in design. What challenges did you face in charting their journey onscreen?*  
 K: The Vignellis are considered the most important designers of the second half of the 20th century; their timeless principles of design have made them *éminence grise* in the field. Creating a high quality film that did their work justice was a major challenge. We wanted to not only show their vast portfolio which spans different areas of design in over fifty years of collaboration, but also offer a window into the dynamics of their partnership; to let audiences have a sense of who they are as creative people. We wanted to feature both Massimo and Lella and their work, because it often seems that Lella hasn't gotten adequate credit for their collaborative projects.

As much of their well-known work have already been created, we couldn't include much "behind the scenes" footage, although we do have some aspects, such as the changing of the architectural plan at St. Peter's Church, the build-up to the opening of s26 restaurant, as well as some more personal moments that let you see a bit more of their personalities and dynamic exchanges such as the lunchtime scene. Another challenge was deciding what projects of the prolific pair we wanted to feature, since clearly not all could be included in an 80-minute film.

*What preparations or research did you undertake for the film?*  
 K: Before filming, we discussed with the Vignellis about the people they thought we should speak to about their work and created a list of others that we chose to interview for the film. We also researched a bit on the projects connected to these individuals prior to interviewing them. We then considered the groundbreaking and opening of the Vignelli Center of Design at the Rochester Institute of Technology as a narrative arc.

*The average man on the street often sees design in its final stage; as an end product. How did the medium of film and its narrative help to shed light on the process of design?*  
 K: The medium of film helps to illustrate some of the anecdotes and thinking that went behind the processes of the different projects, allowing audiences to realise that a brilliant idea can form quite spontaneously, based on inspiration from one's surrounding (as in the glasses that were inspired by the Salute dome in Venice); or the fact that something that is a beautiful design can be ahead of its time and initially considered "a failure" (the plastic Heller cup). There are many different scenarios and routes that lead to the final work. Books and catalogues can contain details about creative people, but film is the next best thing to being there.

*I like the pleasure of a surprise that takes the work away from expectations; the sense of grace that something just had to be that way, and enjoying the Vignellis' points of view, humour and personalities.*

*What is your favourite Vignelli design?*  
 K: I personally adore Lella's necklace, the Senza Fine, because it's flexible and changeable. I'm also attracted to the National Parks brochures with their iconic grid design. I'm a big fan of the NYC subway map from the 70s and the overall graphics that unify the transit system that one experiences every day.

ROBERTO: I like the pleasure of a surprise that takes the work away from expectations; the sense of grace that something just had to be that way, and enjoying the Vignellis' points of view, humour and personalities.

[www.designisonefilm.com](http://www.designisonefilm.com)

## THE TENTS

—*James Belzer on the iconic New York Fashion Week and its historic move to Lincoln Center.*

*How did your idea for this film come about?*  
 I was working at *Harper's Bazaar* when I first heard about the New York Fashion Week's planned move away from Bryant Park. Bryant Park is located near the Garment Center in New York, so the move to Lincoln Center was an emotional change. Having directed theater and other projects during my years in the magazine business, I was preparing to launch my film career. So when I spoke to Fern Mallis, creator of the fashion week, about the idea to do the documentary and found that there wasn't a plan in place to capture this history, it was clear that I needed to leave the magazine business to start work on the film immediately!

*What makes New York Fashion Week (NYFW) so different from other fashion festivals? What kind of buzz does it create?*  
 NYFW is more like a global convention; a meeting of people from all over the fashion industry to discuss not only fashion trends but also larger cultural ideas that are coming for the following season. The diversity and sheer number of people who come to NYFW make it a really unique time for the global fashion community.

*What was your first exposure to NYFW?*  
 I got my start in fashion at Fairchild Publications soon after graduating from NYU. It was a very formative time when the shows were not organised in one place, so you really had to have connections to see the shows. I was lucky enough to be handed a few invitations here and there. Seeing the clothes, models and runway come to life with the most amazing music got me hooked on the fashion show experience early in my career.

*In the film, you interviewed many designers, from Tommy Hilfiger to Donna Karan and Betsey Johnson, as well as the event's organisers and numerous celebrities. Who left the deepest impression on you?*  
 Glenda Bailey, the Editor-In-Chief of *Harper's Bazaar*. After working at the magazine for over 5 years, I was always impressed with her enthusiasm for fashion. It was a thrill interviewing her for the film.

*Across the globe, fashion weeks are show-stopping extravaganzas. Was there always that much emphasis on spectacles in what is essentially a trade event?*  
 Fashion week was initially an event for the fashion industry



but as the awareness of fashion shows increased to the public, the consumer interest in what was going on there increased as well. Plus, the media started covering what was happening at the shows for the consumer as well and things took off from there.

*It must have been chaotic at the event. Were there any logistical challenges to filming at The Tents?*  
 Yes, it was the endurance and stamina needed to cover all the shows and activities going on! We spent ten full days from morning to night in The Tents during the last season in Bryant Park in February 2010. There was always something happening, so the crew had to keep moving and running from one thing to the next. When IMG hosted the farewell party on the closing night of the last season there, we were all exhausted!

*The fashion industry has long prided itself on a kind of hallowed exclusivity. With the recent film The September Issue (2009) providing an insider look into the life of Vogue editor Anna Wintour, and now The Tents on the attraction of NYFW, can we expect many more films about the industry and what are you most curious to see?*

There are so many amazing, strong personalities in the fashion industry, plus some of the related businesses—modelling, etc., hold great interest to many people. So I think we can expect to see more fashion film projects in the future. The one I'm most excited to see is my next fashion film called *Make it in Manhattan & The USA*—a new documentary about the reinvigoration of our base of domestic apparel manufacturing.

[www.thetentsmovie.com](http://www.thetentsmovie.com)

## MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ: THE ARTIST IS PRESENT

—*Producer, co-director Jeff Dupre on how the multi-persona performance artist Marina Abramović charmed her way into his film.*

*What was your first encounter with Marina?*  
 I was seated next to Marina at a friend's dinner party when she told me about her upcoming retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and I was smitten. There was tremendous potential for a feature documentary on her life and work because: 1) Marina herself is so seductive and outrageous. 2) MoMA had never given a retrospective to a performance artist before. 3) Marina intended to take some major risks in the work she was going to perform. The stakes were high and there was a built-in timeline to structure the film: After a lifetime of striving, Marina at age 63 was setting out to secure her legacy and prove to a very skeptical world that performance art is worthy of our attention. My own ambivalence regarding performance art—and a wish to work through and clarify (though never resolve) them—made me want to make the film even more.

*To the majority public, performance art is at best powerfully symbolic and at worst, pure eccentricity. Most times, it's a heinous mix of both. Were you attempting to debunk any myths about performance art in this film?*

We initially thought that we might end up taking a very critical stance on Marina and performance art in general. I really didn't know if Marina would pull off the MoMA performance until it got underway in March 2010. But once the show began, what I witnessed made a believer out of me. That said, I do think there is plenty of bad performance art out there, just as there's plenty of bad painting, music, poetry, etc.



*How did you spotlight Marina's uniqueness as an artist?*  
 In the film, we tried to show how Marina's performance at MoMA was a distillation of all that was best in her work and that she did not need any props or theatrical flourishes to create powerful art. We traced the evolution of her work and showed where we thought it fell short—when it strayed into theatricality, and how *The Artist is Present* overcomes that in its simplicity and purity, relying solely on the presence of the artist, the audience, and the setting. In the performance, she merely sat at a table and invited others to sit across from her. But look what she wrought in doing something that sounds so simple. The setting for *The Artist is Present*—the MoMA atrium—was an incredibly effective amplifier.

*Marina has different personae onscreen and off. How hard was it to capture all these?*  
 Marina's different personae made her all the more interesting as a character. In the film, we are introduced to three Marinas: one is a soldier, the product of two



partisan parents; the other, a sad, vulnerable little girl whose parents didn't give her enough love, and then there is the artist who has a spiritual wisdom and can transcend the first two. She has a humanising combination of ambition, fragility and incredible power. In every scene, she would reveal some kernel of truth about herself. I've never seen anything like it. People talk about the MoMA show in quasi-mythological terms, and the film has served her mythmaking very well.

*What did you ultimately hope for your film to achieve?*  
 The film premiered at Sundance 2012, won the Audience Award at the Berlin Film Festival and went on to tour and win prizes at numerous festivals around the world. It aired on HBO last summer in the US and is being released globally in all media. We just received a Peabody Award this week, which is a huge honor. The response has been tremendous so I am happy with what we've accomplished.

[www.marinafilm.com](http://www.marinafilm.com)

THE U PRESS is the official media partner for **A Design Film Festival 2013**, presented by Anonymous. The film festival will be held from 15 - 16 June, 2013 at School of the Arts, 1 Zubir Said Drive, Singapore.

[www.designfilmfestival.com](http://www.designfilmfestival.com)